Section II
VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS

The battle over battles

Despite the many overlapping areas described in Section I, reenactors and the NPS do differ significantly in their ideas about appropriate commemoration of battles and wars. The central disagreement focuses on NPS policies prohibiting reenactors from portraying opposing lines or from simulating casualties and deaths.

When Revolutionary War reenactors were asked in the 1999 survey how their relationship with the NPS could be improved, the great majority of comments focused on these regulations:

> *Most recreated units are first and foremost battle reenactment groups. NPS guidelines to the contrary, if you do not allow battle reenactments as part of the weekend's activities, the units will simply not come, ours included! This is why we spend all that money on our uniforms, camps, horses, trailer expenses, and travel time: we like to do battles… I did not raise as large a group as I have by setting up tents and cooking stew. If you want us and other groups there, include a battle reenactment as part of the schedule.*
>
> *Although NPS had justifiable concerns about safety during the Bicentennial (justified due to numerous safety problems during the Civil War Centennial a few years earlier), Revolutionary War reenactors have had a* long *period of excellent safety… For this reason,* opposing *tacticals and simulated casualties should be permitted on NPS Rev War sites.*
>
> *I believe that as long as the Public is kept in "safe" spectator areas, attention should be focused on representing the historical aspects of the Battle as closely as possible, i.e. opposing troops OK.*
>
> *I have seen both good and bad at National Parks. Although I agree in principle with most of what is said and done, I believe there should be a compromise on the "battles" so that the public could view on the grounds where these events took place. We preserve sites but it seems we should show the circumstances of why.*

Revolutionary War parks and reenactors have a common set of goals: to honor the memory of those who fought in the American Revolution, and to communicate to the public their sense of how important this history is. But the two groups use very different strategies to achieve that goal.

Reenactors can and do find many satisfactions in smaller events where battle reenactment is not the central focus. However, a big part of the attraction of most events is the chance to participate in a battle. Reenactors seek ways to immerse themselves in the alternate realities they so painstakingly create, and few situations can match the multi-sensory experience of being on a huge outdoor "stage" in the midst of gunfire, smoke, shouting, and confusion.

Not only is this a way to step outside present-day reality, but it symbolically duplicates the characteristic that reenactors most admire in their historical models: their willingness to risk their lives in battle. Just as combat is a crucial test of a soldier's courage, the simulation of combat is a central form of homage for reenactors.

Recent comments from Revolutionary War reenactors on an Internet list illustrate this sense that reenacting battles is a form of honoring the dead:

> *[I want] to remind myself what type of people I am representing and [have] a reminder of why I should appreciate their efforts and honor them. I would also like to honor them by showing people closely what really happened at many actual battles. Not just do I want to show them, but I like this also for myself. I personally get more revved up and excited when I get to participate in an event, where I can actually think to myself for a few hours that I am here (whether it be fighting Yorktown, Monmouth, or Guilford Courthouse). The feeling of actually doing the movements of those battles would allow me to feel the moment and its importance.* (Royal23ROF)

> *We at least have to try to be the "mirror image" of our forefathers so that others may have a glimpse of the former times. We owe it to our posterity*. (danlambert)

In many ways, reenactors feel that they are speaking on behalf of the original soldiers by portraying them through reenactment. They feel a strong sense of affinity for"ordinary" soldiers, rather than the well-known generals and heroes. Perhaps reaching for an experience of camaraderie and common purpose that the Vietnam era denied them, or perhaps reacting against historical revisions that have cast American militarism in a negative light, reenactors feel they are speaking on behalf of the common soldiers who have fought in all of America's wars.

Further, they are very certain that their efforts would be (or, in some mystical sense, are) appreciated by those long-dead soldiers. Rallying the notoriously contentious Civil War reenactment community to participate in the 1992 Turner Entertainment filming of "Gettysburg," an influential reenactor urged his peers, on behalf of their ancestors, to put aside their concerns about payment:

> *Money be damned. Remember the Paymaster scene in "Glory" when the [black] troops were paid less than others? "Tear it up!" they cried.*

> *They didn't desert or walk away. They said that the money wasn't the real issue. Let's forget about the money as a major issue. Let's fall in and do the job that we can do. The boys in the cemetery nearby want their story told.* (LeBoeuf)

Policy-makers and many others at the National Park Service view reenacted battles in a very different light. For them, reenacting a battle is not an appropriate way to honor the memory of those who originally fought. Park Service staff spoke to me about several levels of misgivings about the subject.

- First and foremost, many NPS personnel are troubled by the impossibility of ever truly recreating combat. This is not to imply that they wish it *could* be recreated—rather the opposite. Because it is so impossible—and undesirable—to replicate battle, they see no sense in making an attempt that can only fall short of the reality, and that can never convey even a fraction of war's destructive horror.

- Aside from these underlying objections to reenacted battles, staff at parks point out many logistical and interpretive difficulties inherent in this type of performance. The black powder ranger at Saratoga NHP believes—and tells visitors—that "Reenacted battles are *for* reenactors," not for the viewing public. It can be extremely difficult to guarantee good sight lines, coordinated timing, and audience comprehension of what is happening on the field. The constraints of geography and the need for preservation may also work against the creation of plausible scenarios. At Minute Man NHP, for example, it has been extremely difficult for reenactors and park staff to portray the unusual running battle that took place in 1775 so that reenactors have a sense of reality while visitors have some idea of what they are seeing.

- Finally, many park staff members are concerned about the "carnivalesque" atmosphere that tends to be created at battle reenactments. Spectators, like reenactors, often become caught up in the noise, the smoke, and the spectacle of brightly-clad performers moving across a broad outdoor stage. Just as reenactors may experience an exhilarating sense of "time travel" during a well-executed battle reenactment, the audience tends to respond more with appreciation or excitement than with reverence or empathy. Like any performance, battle reenactments can be extremely stimulating, and it is this very quality that the NPS seeks to mute and control.

Interestingly, personal experience of combat does not seem to determine a person's position on the question of reenacted battles. There are combat veterans among the ranks of Revolutionary War reenactors, and also among NPS policy-makers and park staff. There are both veterans and non-veterans in both groups. Rather, the difference in views is a reflection of differing sets of values, as we will see below.

Safety

On the surface, safety seems like a simple issue for reenactors. No one wants to watch or participate in reenactment if there is a serious risk of being hurt. But reenactor concern over safety is more than pragmatic. Reenactors make a fetish of safety-consciousness, and often seem to be in competition with each other to see whose standards can be the strictest.

The reason is quite simple. Safety is what separates the *symbolic* pursuit of reenactment from the *literal* pursuit of war. A concern with safety does more than keep everyone safe—it signals to the performers and the audience that they are operating in a symbolic realm, not an actual one. As a Civil War reenactor explained to me, "Safety is the line." Like most reenactors, this man actively pursued experiences where, as he said, "the window opens" between imagined and concrete reality. But reenactment's emphasis on safety was what allowed him to feel secure enough to attempt this kind of mental and emotional shift.

It is misleading to picture all reenactors as "time trippers," searching for the "high" of alternate realities. In fact, the great majority of reenactors are extremely clear about the lines between past and present, and their brief flashes of "feeling how it must have been" are not the same as believing themselves literally to have been transported into the past.

In fact, those who *do* become lost in an imagined world tend to be shunned by most units—precisely because someone who becomes too caught up in the moment while carrying a black-powder weapon is a hazard to everyone around him. People who forget that they are performing threaten the entire performance. "We see safety and authenticity as our main points, but safety is the first one," a board member from the Brigade of the American Revolution said to me. "If someone isn't safe, then authenticity doesn't matter."

Safety, then, is a crucial concern to reenactors. In most cases, it is reenactors, not spectators, who are likely to be injured by dirty or improperly-handled weapons. As the reenactor community grows more cohesive (see Section IV), it also becomes more effective at policing its membership. Some reenactor units and umbrella organizations have more stringent safety regulations than the National Park Service. The Northwest Territorial Alliance, for example, sets a smaller maximum powder charge than is allowed by NPS black powder rules.

Reenactor units utilize a variety of strategies to train their members in safety techniques. Some that were listed most frequently by survey respondents during this project are:

- a training/probation period before full membership
- ongoing training sessions for all members, at events and/or off-season
- a mentorship, sponsorship, or "buddy" system for recruits
- use of umbrella organization or NPS safety standards

Yet many reenactors feel that their safety records are not respected by those at the National Park Service. Beyond that, most believe that NPS policies prohibiting battles are rooted in concerns over safety, as these quotes from the 1999 reenactor survey show:

> *It is my hope that by doing small shows at sites and demonstrating adherence to NPS safety regs that one day the NPS might allow opposing force tacticals at sites.*
>
> *Review and enforcement of safety regulations should be examined so that opposed forces tacticals may be conducted at NPS sites.*
>
> *It is my sincere belief that the American Revolution re-enactor—unlike the Civil War re-enactor before us—has proved himself* safe *and* trustworthy *to do a battle re-enactment or tactical demonstration on an NPS site without significant risk… The longer the NPS treats American Revolution re-enactors as un-trustworthy, the harder it will be to get good events at NPS sites.*
>
> *I am not fond of the NPS policy regarding fighting battles and opposing forces, but I understand. I feel that units strive for safety too, and battles fought on the site should be allowed.*

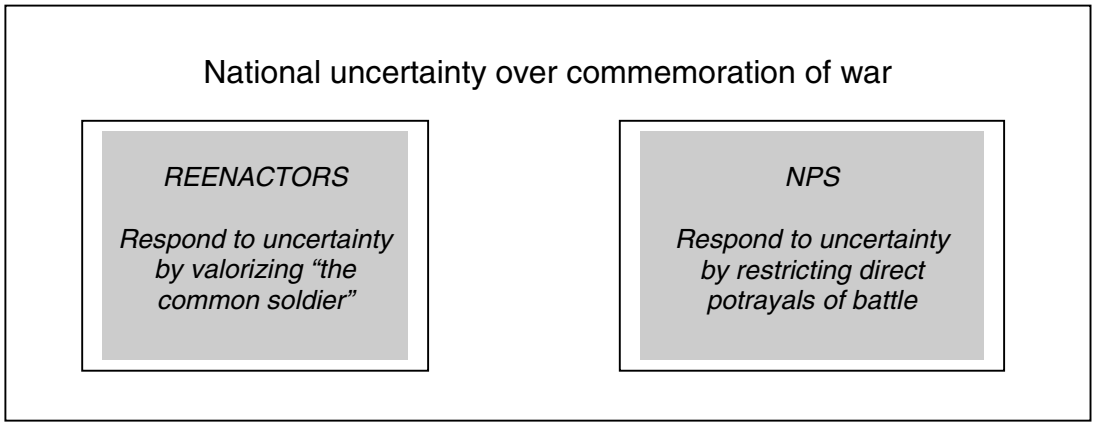
Leaving aside the question of whether Revolutionary War reenactors suffer because of a poorer safety record among Civil War reenactors, it is clear that the NPS policies on opposing lines and simulated casualties are linked closely in reenactors' minds to NPS concerns about safety. If reenactors can just establish their trustworthiness in this respect, many believe, the NPS will eventually relent and allow battle reenactments on the consecrated lands in its care.

Differing systems of values

As I have shown in Section I, the NPS and reenactor communities overlap in many significant ways. They form a continuum, rather than two distinct groups. However, especially toward the edges of this continuum, reenactors and parks draw on quite different value systems. These values are expressed in reenactors' performances, and in NPS interpretations and policies.

Before looking at these different sets of values, it is worth noting they arise from the same cultural context. Since World War II, and especially since Vietnam, Americans have had to face many questions about how they view themselves, their heroes, and their wars. Militarism and the commemoration of war has become extremely problematic, as the national controversy over the *Enola Gay* exhibit demonstrated.

Both avocational reenactment and National Park Service policies are responses to this national process of questioning and reassessment, as the diagram below illustrates:



Reenactor values in performance

Reenactors pursue two primary goals: to honor the memory of the past, and to create a present-day community that reflects their own perception of past values.[1] These two goals are linked, especially in the intense masculine atmosphere and camaraderie of reenactment. Through their central focus on the world of the "ordinary" soldier, reenactors affirm the cultural importance of citizens doing their duty, of men serving in the military, and of the action of the individual in the wider society.

This last point is perhaps the most important. Themselves citizens of an ever more globalized society in which individual actions seem to matter less and less, reenactors use their "hobby" to insist that individuals *do* matter. Their of historical material reflects the way they grapple with this troubling tension.

By the eighteenth century, individual soldiers had already become mere human units in military tactics that favored mass and uniformity. Yet there was still room for personal initiative, in ways that became less common or impossible during highly-mechanized twentieth century wars. In the eighteenth century, a still-loyal Benedict Arnold could lead a daring charge at Saratoga to save the battle for the Continentals; ordinary farmers could pick up muskets and change the course of world history at Old North Bridge in Concord. Even the later Civil War gives reenactors scope for showing individual gallantry and courage within immense armies.

Searching for a way to feel honorable, dutiful, and connected to the society and the nation, reenactors put themselves into an imagined military setting, rich with real-life camaraderie and even aspects of hardship and sacrifice. (Although

reenactment truly is a picnic compared with war, there are nevertheless some hardships involved in sleeping in a tent on a sub-zero night or walking for hours in a hot sun in wool clothing while carrying a heavy load of gear.) This performance is a way to make contact with an experience that many reenactors feel is central to their identity—an experience that the latter half of the 20th century has made problematic at best.

The values that come through in reenactors' performances, then, center around ideas of:

- duty, especially civic and military duty
- a separation of that duty from questions of ideology
- unapologetically "old-fashioned" gender roles
- valorization of the experiences of "ordinary" soldiers
- an intense focus on the experiences of the individual

All of these are values that have been challenged during the past four decades. Feminism, the anti-war activism of the Vietnam era, approaches to history that put once-marginalized groups in the center of the story—all have eroded American certainties of the 1940s and 1950s.

On the surface, it may seem as though reenactors are trying to escape these challenges by attempting to step into a simpler world where lost ideals or values still exist. My research, however, suggests that the matter is by no means this simple.

Despite its surface preoccupation with material detail and vicarious military experiences, the reenactment community also grapples with many of the real-life questions raised by recent shifts in American social life. They do so through the performative medium that they have created themselves, using a language of "authenticity" to come to terms with difficult issues around gender, race, and the construction of history. (This language of "authenticity" will be discussed in more detail in the following section.)

NPS interpretations and policies

It is important to note that current NPS policies and interpretations have been shaped by the same social changes as reenactors' performances. If parks and reenactors overlap in their characteristics and some of their techniques, they also share a common set of cultural references, which have to a large extent shaped their views and presentations of history. This fact is important because it sheds light on the underlying reasons for NPS policies on reenactment, reasons which reenactors do not currently grasp.

There is no doubt that these policies originated in concerns about safety. Policy-makers of the early 1960s believed reenactments did have value for interpretive

purposes, but that the benefits were outweighed by potential hazards to the participants, the spectators, and parks' physical resources. Following the 1961 Manassas centennial reenactment, and a second event at Antietam National Battlefield in 1962, staged battles were prohibited at national parks.

However, from the beginning it appears that there were other, unexpressed concerns about whether recreated battles were an appropriate way of commemorating wars.[2] As time passed, the ban on portraying opposing lines was questioned and challenged by reenactors and by some within the Park Service. This prompted policy-makers to begin to articulate some of their previously-unstated objections.

These centered on the concerns already listed above:

- the impossibility of conveying the reality of war through reenactment
- the "carnivalesque" atmosphere created at battle reenactments

A 1975 version of the reenactment policy offered no direct explanation of these points, suggesting that reenactors' and others' challenges to it arose later, perhaps as reenactment became more popular and better-organized during the bicentennial years. By 1988, a revision of the policy made the NPS case more bluntly, stating that reenacted battles **"generate an atmosphere inconsistent with the memorial quality of the battlefields and other military sites"** under the Park Service's care.

For many reasons, NPS approaches to interpretation and memorialization have tended to reflect a more critical and direct response to the many social and historiographical challenges of the past 40 years. It is beyond the scope of this study to try to identify the various historiographical shifts within Park Service interpretation in recent decades. However, it seems likely that the Park Service's nature as a public agency has compelled it to respond to social changes in a way that reenactment, being a private and decentralized enterprise, has tended to do more indirectly and on its own terms. Park Service interpretation has been shaped by the need to answer to many different constituencies, making its presentations necessarily more diverse and multivocal.

Although there are still many points of overlap on the interpretive front lines, the overarching value systems of the two communities are quite different. Reenactors insist that the individual's experience is central and inviolate; parks (at least on a policy level) take a more critical, contextual approach. NPS interpretation does stress the importance of visitors making personal and emotional connections with history. But NPS policy-makers draw the line at reenacted battles, because they believe personal and emotional responses tend to work against the ability to take a critical view of war.

Many reenactors believe that NPS policies were written by office-bound bureaucrats with no personal experience of war. One respondent to the 1999 survey wrote:

> *The regs should be re-written by people who know the* real *values (and limitations) of reenacting, NOT by bureaucrats!*

Another took a stronger stance:

> *It seems that the only "policy" the NPS currently has towards Rev. War reenactors is a set of black powder safety rules that have sprung from some uninformed lawyer's hellish vision of half-crazed, armed and irresponsible men bent on mayhem.*

However, the policies were created and are upheld in many cases by people with direct experience of military life and even of combat. Many of the original policy-makers of the 1960s were veterans of World War II; some of their successors are Vietnam-era veterans, whose experiences have left them loath to sanction any activity that equates war with play.

The reenactor who wrote the last quote above is a Vietnam combat veteran; so is the National Park Service's chief historian, who strongly upholds the NPS ban on reenacted battles. As noted above, reenactors' and park staff's experiences are often strikingly similar, and were shaped by the same wider cultural context. But reenactors and NPS staff tend to draw different lessons from the past four decades of American life—or rather, they work toward accommodating the changes of those decades in different ways, using techniques that are sometimes similar to express values that are often very different.

Actual vs. assumed differences

In speaking with reenactors during this project, I frequently asked, "What do you think are the reasons for the NPS policies on reenactment?" Almost invariably, reenactors pointed to safety concerns. They were not receptive to the idea that more deep-seated commemorative questions might be at the heart of the "no opposing lines" rule.

This apparent lack of understanding, coming from a group of people who are otherwise extremely articulate and perceptive about what they do, may seem surprising at first. To me, however, it suggests two interpretations:

- Focusing on safety concerns may be a way for reenactors to feel that they have some control over their access to sacred sites. Many hope and believe that an excellent safety record will eventually convince the NPS to loosen its restrictions on reenactment at national parks.

- Reenactors tend to negotiate their problems indirectly, through the medium of performance. (See Section III for more detail on this point.) The reenactment community can be very outspoken and articulate, but I believe that it prefers to use performance to mask the issues that trouble it most—particularly the loss of ideals and values that once shaped their sense of individual and national identity. The powerful emotional connection that motivates reenactors may make it difficult or impossible for most to analyze this aspect of what they do.

Only one of the 1999 survey respondents suggested that safety was not the reason for the NPS policies:

> *Overly restrictive rules regarding: battle demos on park property, musket use and inspection, black powder/cartridge safety and use, time between artillery shots, etc., are presented as matters of "safety," but I suspect—* everyone *suspects—they were written largely to preclude any meaningful use of reenacting as an interpretive tool at NPS sites.*

Yet even this respondent—who may be articulating undercurrents of thought that were not apparent to me in other reenactors' responses—saw the NPS policies as being motivated by hostility toward reenactment, not by any philosophical stance on appropriate forms of commemoration.

In their survey comments, many other reenactors expressed a sense of feeling unwelcome or unappreciated at national parks:

> *It appears to me that reenactors are generally a mistrusted, misunderstood and under-used resource in relation to the NPS.*

> *I find it amusing that Williamsburg and countless state historical sites, in the south, are beating at our door for event support, but the NPS, which is entrusted with the preservation and education about our national heritage, ignores or mistreats us.*

> *Too many times reenactors have been looked at as the enemy by some parks. Of course, when this occurs, reenactors respond in kind.*

Yet the great majority of units responding to the survey (82%) have participated in recent events at national parks. Many of these units have strong and ongoing relationships with at least one park.

The appeal of the original historical sites in the NPS's care is clearly an important reason why reenactors continue to attend park events despite their dislike of NPS policies. However, looking at the entire list of reasons reenactors gave for participating in park events, an interesting pattern emerges:

It gives us an opportunity to reenact on actual historic sites.	88%
We have good relationships with NPS staff through park or other reenactor activities.	**73%**
Parks invite us to their events.	**71%**
We have a longstanding relationship with certain parks.	**65%**
It is a learning opportunity for us.	50%
We reach a broader audience by working with parks.	48%
Parks offer interesting facilities or equipment.	42%
It brings prestige to our unit.	40%
Our umbrella organization is involved in park events.	37%
Parks offer interesting scenarios.	29%
The parks pay us a fee.	12%
It is an opportunity for us to recruit new members.	6%
Our unit has a connection to the actual battle.	4%
We act as liaison between park and other units.	2%
It is part of our public service as a state-sponsored unit.	2%
Several parks are geographically close to us.	2%
It is a teaching opportunity for us.	2%

Listed immediately after actual historic sites—before any mention of interpretation, money, audience, or umbrella organizations—are reasons that involve the relationships between reenactors and NPS staff. And these survey results show that the majority of responding units do have strong relationships with national parks despite their comments about feeling undervalued or misunderstood by the NPS. 88% of the units who responded to this survey were planning to attend NPS events within the coming season.

I have been focusing here primarily on reenactors' perspectives. But the 1998 NPS study that preceded this project revealed a similar pattern. When we initially spoke with staff at Revolutionary War parks about their experiences with reenactors, we heard many anecdotal comments about the frustrations and difficulties of holding reenactor events at parks. Most of these difficulties stemmed from reenactors' desire to stage battles. A smaller number involved reenactors whose portrayals were demonstrably inaccurate in some way. Park staff also raised some concerns about safety issues

However, when we quantified Revolutionary War parks' opinions on reenactors, their responses were much more positive. 44% of responding parks reported that reenactor activity at their parks was increasing; no parks reported a decrease. All the parks felt that reenactors did benefit their interpretations. Asked why they worked with reenactors, parks replied:

They enhance the park's interpretive program.	100%
They enhance the park's visibility with the public.	94%
They provide resources not available to us otherwise.	94%
They draw visitors to the park.	88%
Local reenactor groups have a longstanding relationship with our park.	69%

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Reenactors pressure us directly for access to the park.	13%
Reenactors pressure us indirectly for access to the park.	6%
They provide training, knowledge, and skills.	6%

Like reenactors, parks seemed to draw immediate attention to the negative aspects of their working relationship, when that relationship is in fact quite a positive one. How can we explain this inconsistency? Recent work in the field of conflict resolution may provide some useful ideas for addressing this question.

Researchers who have studied antagonistic groups (for example, opponents and supporters of the death penalty) have confirmed that we tend to see our own versions of reality as more reliable than others'—that is, we feel we are rational and reasonable in our opinions, while those who oppose us are biased, egotistical, or misinformed.

Beyond this, however, some researchers (for example, Robinson, Keltner, Ward & Ross) have found that most of us have a tendency to see those in opposing groups as being more extreme than they actually are. Even more important, most of us view ourselves as having more moderate positions than the other people in our own groups.

This suggests an interesting possibility. If most people in opposing groups feel that they occupy a more moderate, middle ground than their opponents or even than their own associates, perhaps there are far fewer people holding the extreme positions than everyone assumes. Perhaps, in fact, those extreme positions exist more in the collective imagination than in reality.

There is no doubt that many in the reenactor community and within the NPS see the park/reenactor relationship as an adversarial one. And actual conflicts clearly do exist within the relationship, as the case studies in this report will show. Parks and reenactors often operate out of different value systems, which leads to disagreement about how wars and battles should be commemorated.

Yet the evidence gathered during this project also shows a strong and continuing connection between the two groups, and even areas where they seem to blend into one another. While their differing value systems must be taken into account, this is not necessarily an insurmountable barrier to improved park/reenactor relations.

Having looked at some of the hidden barriers to improving those relations in this section, we will turn next to some concrete ideas for maximizing parks' and reenactors' similarities, and for negotiating their differences.

[1] Reenactors give many other reasons for what they do: a love of learning about history, educating the public, a desire to escape the twentieth century temporarily, etc. But I believe that these are secondary, and support the two primary goals of honoring American soldiers and creating a present-day community based on idealized past values.

[2] For background on the evolution of NPS policies on reenactment, I am grateful to Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley and Bureau Historian Barry Mackintosh, who shared with me their recollections and interpretations of these policies.